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The Fine Colour of Rust

Written by P. A. O'Reilly

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P.A. O'REILLY

The Fine Colour of Rust



blue door

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The Japanese have a word, *sabi*, which connotes the simple beauty of worn and imperfect and impermanent things: a weathered fence; an old cracking bough in a tree; a silver bowl mottled with tarnish; the fine colour of rust.

1

Norm Stevens Senior tells me I'll never get that truck off my land. He says it's too old, been there too long, the hoist will try to lift the thing and it will break apart into red stones of rust.

'Leave it,' he says. 'Let it rust away. One day you'll look and it won't be there anymore.' He gives me a sideways glance. 'Like husbands. You look away and when you look back they're gone, right?'

'Right.'

'So have you heard from the bastard?'

'Nope.'

'And you're getting by all right? For money?'

'I've got more money now than when he was here.'

We both laugh.

'Now, Loretta, you know I can take the kids for a night if you need some time off.'

'I might take you up on that. I've got a prospect. A biker, but a nice one, not a loser. On a Harley, no less.'

'A Harley?' He raises his eyebrows. Whenever he does that, a pink scaly half-moon of skin above his left eyebrow wrinkles. He reaches up to touch it.

'You should have that looked at, Norm.'

'Yeah, yeah, and I should give up the spare parts work and get out of the sun too.'

He gestures around his junkyard. There are tractor parts,

rolls of wire, tyres, motor mowers, corrugated iron sheets all rusted and folded, bits of cars and engines, pots and pans, gas bottles, tools, toys, bed frames, oil drums, the chipped blades of threshers and harvesters. Some of the machinery is so bent and broken you can't even tell what it was meant for. In the centre of the yard is a lemon tree, the only greenery in sight. It always has lemons. I'm sure I know what Norm does to help it along, but I don't ask. He's got four guard dogs too, tied up around the yard, vicious snarling things. As if anyone would want to steal any of this crap.

'Well, I'd better pick up the kids,' I say. I don't want to pick up the kids. I want to send them to an orphanage and buy myself a nice dress and learn to live the way I used to, before I turned into the old scrag I am now.

'Don't you worry about that truck.' Norm stretches out his long skinny arm and pats me on the back. 'It'll go back into the land.'

I get into the car, pump the accelerator like I'm at the gym and turn the key three times before the engine fires. I should have that looked at, I think. There's half a kilo of sausages on the seat beside me, and I realize they've been sitting in the sun for half an hour. When I unwrap the paper and have a sniff I get a funny sulphur smell. They'll cook up all right, I tell myself, and I gun the Holden and screech in a U-turn on to the road. I can't get used to this huge engine – every time I take off I sound like a pack of hoons at Bathurst.

It's three thirty already and Jake and Melissa will be waiting at the school gate, ready to jump in and whine about how everyone else's mum always gets there before I do. Maybe I will drop them off at the orphanage.

When I get to the school gate the kids are both standing with their hands on their hips. I wonder if they got that from me; old scrag standing with her hands on her hips, pursing her thin lips, squinting into the sun. You could make a statue of that.

It would look like half the women in this town. Dust and a few plastic bags swirling around its feet, the tail lights of the husband's car receding into the distance. They should cast it in bronze and put it in the foyer of Social Security.

'Mum, we have to have four sheets of coloured cardboard for the project tomorrow.'

'All right.'

'And me too, Mum, I have to have a lead pencil and I don't want bananas in my lunch anymore because they stink.'

'All right.'

As I steer the great car down the highway towards home I have a little dream. I'll swing into the driveway and sitting next to the veranda will be a shiny maroon Harley Davidson. I won't dare to look, but out of the corner of my eye I'll see a boot resting on the step, maybe with spurs on it. Then I'll slowly lift my head and he'll be staring at me the way George Clooney stared into J. Lo's eyes in *Out of Sight* and I'll take a deep breath and say to him, 'Can you hang on five minutes while I drop the kids at the orphanage?'

What I actually find when we get home is a bag of lemons sitting on the veranda. Norm must have left them while we were at the newsagent.

'Who are these from?' Jake asks.

'Norm.'

'How do you know?'

'Oil on the bag.'

I bought Norm a cake of Solvol once. Delivered it to the junkyard wrapped in pretty pink paper with a bow. He rang to thank me. 'I think you're insulting me.'

'It's for your own good, Norm.'

'You're a minx. If I was thirty years younger . . .'

'Fifty more like,' I told him, 'before you'd get those paws on me.'

That night, when the kids are finally settled in their rooms doing their homework, I get on the phone for the usual round of begging.

'Are you coming to the meeting tomorrow?'

'Oh, Loretta, I'm sorry, I completely forgot. I've made other plans.'

I can imagine Helen's plans. They'll involve a cask of white and six changes of clothes before she collapses on the bed in tears and starts ringing her friends – me – asking why she can't find a man. Is she too old, has she lost her looks? It helps to leave the house occasionally, I have to remind her. She certainly hasn't lost her looks. Auburn hair without a single grey strand. Straight white teeth. A country tan. Unlike mousey-haired skinny scragwoman me, she even has a cleavage.

'The grade-three teacher's coming,' I tell her, certain this will change her mind. 'And Brianna's offered to mind all the kids at her place. She must have hired a bouncer.'

'He's told you he's coming?'

'Yeah, he left a message on my machine,' I lie.

So Helen's in. After I herd up seven others with more lies and false promises, I put the sausages on. Sure enough, the sulphur smell fades once they start to burn. I used to enjoy cooking quiche and fancy fried rice and mud cake. Gourmet, like on the telly, the boyfriend would boast to his mates. Then we get married and it's, 'Listen, darl, I wouldn't mind a chop for a change.' Now the kids think gourmet is pickles on your sandwich. They won't even look at a sundried tomato. Last time I tried that, Jake picked them out of the spaghetti sauce and left them lined up like red bits of chewed meat on the side of the plate. 'Gross,' he said, and I had to agree, seeing them like that.

The meeting's in the small room at the Neighbourhood House because the Church of Goodwill had already booked the large room by the time I got round to organizing tonight's meeting. We're sitting pretty much on top of each other, trying to balance cups of tea and Scotch Finger biscuits on our knees. Maxine is supposed to be taking the minutes.

I thought I'd made it up, but the grade-three teacher has come, and Helen's paralysed with excitement and terror. She's wearing enough perfume to spontaneously combust and the smell's so overwhelming that Maxine has to swing the door open. Two minutes later the noise from the meeting next door starts up.

'Yes!' they all shout. 'Yes! I do, I do!'

'Well, I don't.' Maxine swings the door half-shut so that we're dizzy with perfume but still having to shout over the frantic clapping of people being saved next door.

I give the list of apologies and welcome everyone who's come, introducing the grade-three teacher in case the others don't know him. Helen's gone as pink and glistening as a baby fresh out of the bath. She'll have a seizure if she's not careful. I can't see the attraction. The teacher's five foot four, stocky, and always says, 'At the end of the day.'

'At the end of the day,' he says when I introduce him, 'I am totally committed to this cause. Our jobs are at risk too.'

Just in case, I look down at his feet, but no spurs. I read out the list of agenda items. Brenda sighs loudly.

'Do we have to do all this agenda crap? And the motions? I motion, you motion. My Mark's doing motions you wouldn't believe and I have to be home by nine in case I need to take him to Emergency.'

'Yes, we do. Because we're trying to be bloody official. And as you well know, an emergency department that closes at ten in a town half an hour away is one of the reasons we're here. Soon this town will have no services for a hundred kilometres.'

'Oh, yes, ma'am.'

I roll my eyes. Maxine rolls her eyes. For a moment I think of us all rolling our eyes like a bunch of lunatics in the asylum and I almost cheer up.

'Item one. I've written a letter to the member for our local constituency about the closure of the school.' I pause for the inevitable joke about members which, to my amazement,

doesn't come. 'We need everyone who has kids in the school to sign.'

'It'll never work.' Brenda is the optimist of the committee.

'Does anyone know how to drain the oil from a sump?' Kyleen pipes up.

Only another half an hour, I think, and I can pick up the kids from Brianna's, drop them at the orphanage and drive straight down to Melbourne. With the experience I've got, I'll land a good job in a centre for adults with attention deficit disorder.

When I pull up at Brianna's, the kids run to the front door, looking pleased to see me. They're way too quiet in the back seat. They must have done something horrible.

'So did you have a good time?' I ask. I speed up to catch the amber light and the Holden roars with the might of a drunken trucker. I can't make out exactly what Melissa says, but I might have heard the word *fight*. I think back. Were they limping when they got into the car? Was there blood? I can't remember anything like that so I turn on the radio and keep driving along the dark highway, listening to the soothing sound of a voice calling race seven of the trots, something I've learned to love since the radio got stuck on this station.

'Mum?' Melissa says, as we pull into the unsurprisingly Harley-free driveway.

'Yes, sweetie?'

'I don't ever want to leave this house.'

'I thought you wanted to live in a hundred-room mansion with ten servants and a personal homework attendant?'

'Nup.'

'I know what it is – you love what I've done with the place.' My children were so impressed when I fixed the damp patch beside the stove with a hairdryer, a bottle of glue paste and three of Jake's artworks. I had been calling the agent about it for months, but my house is clearly outside the real estate zone of care and responsibility.

'Mum, I'm serious. If Dad sends a letter and we've moved we won't get it.'

I want to believe he'll send a letter – to his children, at least.

'Well, that's settled. We're staying.'

When we get inside, the kids brush their teeth without a single protest and climb into bed.

'You OK, Jakie?' I lean down to kiss him goodnight.

'Brianna and her boyfriend had a fight,' he whispers. 'I think he hit her.'

I kiss him twice, then again.

'I'm sure she's all right. I'll call her tomorrow. You go to sleep now.'

'I don't want bananas in my lunch.'

'I wouldn't dream of it. Bananas stink,' I say as I turn out the light.

Next morning, as I'm packing bananas into their lunch boxes, I realize I forgot to thank Norm for the lemons.

I drop into the yard on the way back from the shops. He's down the back of the block with three other blokes, all of them standing in a line with their arms folded, staring at the body of an old tractor. This would be the matching statue to mine: bloke standing, feet apart, arms folded, staring at a piece of broken machinery. No idea how to fix it. We could put Him and Her statues either side of the highway coming into Gunapan.

I wait beside the shed while the delicate sales negotiations go on. I've never understood exactly how the communication works. Perhaps the meaning is in the number of head nods, or the volume of the grunt as the customer shifts from one leg to the other. After they've stared at the tractor body in apparent silence for five minutes, Norm sees me and ambles up.

'Don't tell me you're going to sell something, Norm?'

'Not bloody likely. Every month these three clowns are here with some new scheme for making money.'

'None of them happens to ride a Harley?'

He doesn't even bother answering, just nods his head at their ute on the road. We step inside the shed for a cuppa. The radio's on the racing station.

'Harlequin Dancer made a good run from fourth in race seven last night,' I remark.

'You need a new car. I'm working on it, love. Shouldn't be too much longer.' Norm hands me a cup, covered in grease, and a paper towel to wipe it with.

There are enough parts in Norm's yard for him to put together ten perfectly good cars, and he has been trying to build me a new one for years. But his speciality is disassembly rather than assembly. As soon as the collection of engine parts and panels begins to bear a resemblance to an actual car, he decides it's not right and has to pull it apart and start again.

He takes a noisy slurp of his tea before he speaks again. 'Sorry I didn't get to the meeting.'

'The school's not your problem.'

'Course it's my problem. It's everybody's bloody problem.'

We drink our tea. The three blokes wave as they pass the shed. There's a protest at Randwick in race two. The jockey on the second-placed horse is alleging interference from the winner at the final turn.

'I've got money on that horse.' Norm turns up the volume.

'Which one?'

'The one that'll buy you a bottle of bubbly if it wins the protest. Long odds. Very long odds. Bring me luck, Loretta.'

The day's starting to heat up and blowies are banging against the tin roof of the shed. Norm picks up the trannie and holds it to his ear. I look out at the heat shimmering over the piles of junk. Norm's touching his crusty forehead as he listens for the outcome of the protest. He must win against the odds sometimes, I think – otherwise why bother betting?

2

Thank you for your letter of 9 January. I fully understand the concerns you have expressed and would like to take this opportunity to explain how these concerns are being addressed by your government.

When I show the committee members the letter at the next meeting they hoot like owls. 'Fully understand!' 'Take this opportunity!' It's as good as a party, they laugh so much.

'I told you it wouldn't work.' Brenda nods sagely.

'It's a step.' I'm not letting her get away with *I told you so*. 'The first step. It's a game. We make a bid, they try to negotiate us down.'

'Sure.' She's still doing that nod. 'Like we've got real negotiating power.'

'Shut up, Brenda,' Norm says.

Helen is here again but the grade-three teacher is missing so Helen is downcast. No, she's more than downcast. Her high hair has flagged. Perhaps the heat in the air has melted the gel. Whatever happened, the fluffy creation that brushed the architrave when she walked in has flattened out to match her spirit and she's slumped in the orange plastic chair beside me, motionless bar the occasional crackle as she winkles another Kool Mint from her open bag, pretending no one can hear the sighs and crunches of her working her way through the packet.

'I've written another letter,' I tell them. 'This time, I've copied it to our shire councillors, the local member, the prime minister, the headmaster, the school board, all the teachers and all of the parents at the school.'

Silence. Kyleen opens her mouth and closes it when Maxine jabs her in the ribs. Norm flips through the pages of minutes in his hands. The air is close and still and next door at the Church of Goodwill meeting someone is talking loud and long in a deep voice.

'I spent our whole budget on photocopying and postage,' I go on. 'You'll get the letter in the mail tomorrow.'

'Is that why we haven't got biscuits?' Trust Kyleen to ask. I've always wondered how many of them only came for the biscuits.

'I buy the biscuits,' Maxine answers. 'I didn't have time, that's all.'

We fall back into silence.

Eventually I speak. 'We could give up. Let them close the school – we can carpool to get the kids to Halstead Primary.'

No one moves. Brenda's staring at the floor. I'm expecting her to jump in and agree with me. Her house is painted a dull army green and her clothes are beige and puce and brown and her kids stay out on the streets till eight or nine at night as Brenda turns on light after light and stands silhouetted in the doorway with her cardigan pulled tight around her, waiting for them to come home. She turns up to my meetings as if she is only here to make sure nothing good happens from them. But tonight she reaches over to pat me on the knee.

'Loretta, I know it won't work, and you probably know deep down it won't work, but you can't give up now,' she says.

Kyleen stands up and punches the air, as if she's at a footie match. 'That's right! Don't give up, Loretta. Like they said in *Dead Poets Society*, "Nil bastardum"," she pauses, then trails off, '"carburettorum" . . .'

'"Grindem down"?' Norm finishes.

* * *

Next day, Norm's cleaning motor parts with kerosene when I knock on the tin frame of his shed.

'Knew it was you. You should try braking a little earlier, Loretta.' He doesn't even have to look up.

'Norm, what happened to your forehead?'

'Bloody doctor chopped off half my face.'

'Oh, God, I knew it. I knew something was wrong with that patch of skin. Not skin cancer?' My heart is banging in my chest.

'Not anymore.' He reaches up to touch the white bandage, which is already covered in oily fingerprints. 'They think they got it all.'

He dunks the engine part into the tin of kerosene and scrapes at it with a screwdriver. I want to hug him, but he and I don't do that sort of thing. I'm going to buy him sunscreen and make him wear it, especially on those sticking-out ears of his. I'll buy him a hat and long-sleeved shirts. I can't imagine life without him.

'Mum, I found some flat tin.' Melissa is in the doorway, shading her eyes with her hand and watching Jake teetering on top of a beaten-up caravan, his arms whirling like propellers.

'Jake, don't move,' I scream.

My toe stubs a railway sleeper as I bolt towards the caravan.

He was probably fine until I panicked. His eyes widen when he looks down and realizes how high he is. His first howl sets off the guard dogs. His second howl sets off car alarms across town. By the time Norm and I coax him down we've both sustained permanent hearing loss. I hold him against me and his howls ease to sobbing.

'Come on, mate, it wasn't that bad.' Norm lifts Jake from my grasp and swings him down to the ground. 'I'll get you a can of lemonade.'

Jake takes a long, hiccupping breath followed by a cat-in-heat kind of moan as he lets out the air.

'Mum! I told you, I found some.' Melissa pulls me, limping, to the back of the yard.

My toe is throbbing and I'm sweating and cross. I wonder why I don't buy a couple of puce cardigans and sink back into the land myself, like Brenda or that truck.

We drag the bits of tin to the shed where Jake is sitting on the counter listening to the golden oldies radio station while Norm scans *Best Bets*.

'Have you got any paint for this tin? I'm going to make signs for the school.'

Norm shakes his head. 'You're a battler, Loretta. And I suppose I'm expected to put them up?'

'On the fence.'

One of my best dreams is Beamer Man. Beamer Man powers his BMW up to the front of the house and snaps off the engine. He swings open his door, jumps out and strides up my path holding expensive wine in one hand and two tickets to Kiddieland in the other.

'We'll need the children out of the way for a week or so,' he explains, 'while I explore every inch of your gorgeous body.'

'Taxi's here. Have a lovely week.' I can feel his eyes on my effortlessly acquired size-ten torso as I give the kids a gentle push out the door.

They run happily to the taxi, clutching their all-you-can-eat-ride-and-destroy Kiddieland tickets, then Beamer Man closes the front door and presses me against the wall.

'Mum, you've painted "Save Our Schol". And you've got paint on your face,' Melissa interrupts to tell me before I get to the good part.

Why did I decide to do this in the front yard? My arms are smeared to the elbows with marine paint, and I'm in the saggy old shorts I swore I'd never wear outside the house. Imagine if Harley Man or Beamer Man went by.

I have a terrible thought. Did Norm mean battler or battleaxe? The school had better be worth all this.